

Was the Apostle Paul Suicidal?
An Analysis on Philippians 1:21-26 in its Cultural Context

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Table of Contents

- I. Introduction (p. 3-10)
 - a. Introduction
 - b. Methodology
 - c. Brief Summary of the Problem of the Passage
 - d. Literary Review
 - e. The Augustinian Objection to this Argument
- II. Paul's World and Culture (p. 10-24)
 - a. Voluntary Death in the Septuagint (Paul's Bible)
 - b. Plato and the concept of ἀνάγκη
 - c. The Stoics and Their View of Voluntary Death
 - d. Roman Literary Tradition on Voluntary Death
 - e. Voluntary Death in Hellenistic Judaism
 - f. Josephus and ἀνάγκη
- III. Exegesis (p. 25-37)
 - a. Exegesis of Philippians 1:21-26
 - b. Contextualizing Philippians 1:21-27 with its Broader World
 - c. Scholarship's Fight for the Interpretation and My Contribution
- IV. Conclusion (p. 37-39)

Introduction

In the 4th Century BCE, the Athenian state sentenced Socrates to death, the mode of death being by hemlock. On his last night alive, he was confronted by his disciples who begged him to escape with them. To their surprise, Socrates refused to leave but to go ahead with the execution because the god made it necessary (ἀνάγκη) for him to do so. The account we have of that last night comes from Plato's *Phaedo* and the impact which that tradition had on the ancient Mediterranean was so great. The *Phaedo* even impacted the literary culture of the Roman Empire, which is mostly seen in the tropes of the noble death.¹

One of those possible tropes of literary references in the Roman Empire is in the letters of, Paul the Apostle. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes the phrase "To live is Christ and to Die is gain" (Phil. 1:21) where Paul is placing value on death. Also, Paul expresses a choice between "staying in the flesh" or "departing with Christ." (Phil. 1:21-26). With this kind of language used, the question is raised: is Paul expressing suicidal language? And if so, is that language Socratic in tradition?

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to address that question. To proceed with this study, I will have to analyze how Paul would have viewed voluntary death. To do this, I will look at what Paul's scriptures, the Old Testament, mentions about the topic. Another way to analyze this will be to look at the greater Roman culture which Paul inhabited. Looking at the Roman culture involves examining the literary trope of the Noble Death. After this, I will do a close exegesis of

¹ *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, edited by Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1419-1420.

the passage itself in order to identify the tradition behind what Paul is communicating and its rhetoric of voluntary death might be Socratic.

When looking at the history of interpretation on this passage, there are many different angles that argue for the correct one. So, the purpose of this study is to approach the question of exegesis contextually, with the wider ancient culture. In order to do this, there will need to be some guidelines to navigate us through this process. First, the word “suicide” will not be used because it would be an anachronism. The reason why is because there was not a word in the Greek language that would represent what we moderns have for suicide. Also, the modern term is a combination of a Latin word and Greek word, which clearly would not have been in Paul’s vocabulary. In order to avoid anachronism, I will use the term “voluntary death” or “self-killing.”²

Second, we cannot assume doctrines in later Christian orthodoxy as a standard view for deciding whether Paul in Phil. 1:21 expressed a wish for voluntary death. The reason for this is that we will have to get as close as possible to Paul’s view, whether it was for him a moral decision or a practical one. Also, since Paul was both Jewish and a Greco-Roman, we will have look at the Old Testament, post-biblical Judaism, and the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. How the Greco-Roman world viewed the topic may offer clues into how Paul viewed it as well. Third, the project will examine the original language of the passage as it fits into this wider Greco-Roman literary culture.³

² Droge, Arthur J., James D. Tabor. *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992).

³ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), 2-7.

In order to do this, there will be a need for outside primary sources to contextualize Paul and this passage. Jewish sources include the Septuagint Bible, including Maccabean text, and Josephus. For the Greco-Roman sources we will use Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Livy, and Plutarch. The secondary sources in use will cover topics ranging from Paul's education to his philosophical background.

Brief Summary of the Problem of the Passage

Before we go in-depth with our study, it is best we have a basic understanding of the problem of the passage. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, our particular pericope/paragraph seems to be out of place. Before that pericope, Paul is describing his imprisonment and how it has led to the "greater progress of the gospel". Then after the passage, Paul tells the Philippians how they should conduct themselves in joy. So, a passage discussing a type of despair seems an odd juxtaposition. No manuscript suggests an interpolation, so the exegete must make sense of the pericope as it stands in the passage as a whole.⁴

To do that, scholars have defined the periscope as 1:21-27 because of the main theme all the clauses share. The precise meaning, however, is something that has garnered debate over the years, with exegetes being divided over what Paul is trying to say. One argument that has emerged since the 1980s is the anachronist claim that Paul is expressing suicidal language. The argument for that comes from viewing the verse by itself:

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary [ἀναγκαϊότερον] for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I

⁴ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 81.

may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.
(Philippians 1:21-26)

The claim that Paul is expressing suicidal language begins with the very first verse where Paul states that dying is a gain. Then in verse 22, Paul expresses a dichotomy where he does not know what to choose between two options whether to “live on in the flesh” or to be “with Christ.” Then Paul expresses even more of an internal conflict in verse 23 where he states that he is “hard pressed” between the option of departing with Christ or staying in the “flesh”. So, from these verses we can conclude that Paul is having some internal conflict on which action he should take. The resolution appears in verses 24-26 where he chooses to stay in the flesh. Paul explains why he chose that in verse 24 because him living would be “more necessary” [ἀναγκαιότερον] for the Philippian church. Then in verse 25 and 26, he returns to the overarching theme of “joy” in the wider literary context.⁵

From that basic reading of the passage it is understandable why modern reader would see this passage as suicidal. The emotional conflicted of departing to be with Christ or staying “in the flesh” to complete more work. With that, it is surprising that this argument is a fairly recent development in scholarship.

Literary Review

Over the past century, the discussion of Paul showing signs of suicidality was only in the ivory towers of scholarship. Now, however, the question of Paul having the desire to kill himself is seen in standard textbooks for undergraduate students. A prime example of this is the fourth edition to *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* by Bart D. Ehrman. In the section about

⁵ D. W. Palmer, "To Die Is Gain" (Philippians I 21)," *Novum Testamentum*, 17 (July 1975), p. 203-218.

Philippians, there is a side box titled “Was Paul Contemplating Suicide” in it. The “suicide” interpretation has now entered general textbook knowledge.⁶

The debate over Paul’s suicidality in modern scholarship began in the late 1980s with Arthur J. Droge’s *Novum Testamentum* article “Mori Lucrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide”. The article proposes that the verse in question is Paul expressing suicidal language. To begin his argument, he explains how the Greco-Roman world viewed suicide and how Paul’s language reflected that. When discussing the Greco-Roman mindset to suicide, Droge identifies the origins of the trope as suicide being Plato’s *Phaedo*.⁷ The second part of his article is primarily focused on suicide in the biblical context, both Old and New Testament. As he discusses it, Droge turns his main attention to Paul and Philippians 1:21-26. In the discussion, he concludes that Paul is expressing a wish for suicide. He defines this hypothesis by a reading of the passage in its cultural context. Droge thus brings Platonic philosophy to show a reading of Paul.

“On the one hand, he prefers death to life because it offers union with Christ and deliverance from earthly troubles. But Paul also recognizes that because a divine ἀνάγκη has been laid upon him he cannot depart until a divine signal is given. Paul therefore chooses to remain, and in so doing aligns himself with a tradition on suicide which can be traced back to Socrates.”⁸

After explaining all the details of his argument, Droge concludes his article with a final quote, being from John Donne who states that Paul was thinking with suicidality.

Understandably, Droge’s thesis drops a bombshell. One of the most noteworthy attempts to counterattack Droge was Clayton Croy’s 2003 article *Journal of Biblical Literature* article

⁶ Bart D. Erhman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 4th ed. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017), 249.

⁷ Arthur J. Droge, “Mori Locrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide,” *Novum Testamentum* 30:3 (1988), 274-286.

⁸ Arthur J. Droge, “Mori Lucrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide”, 284.

“‘To Die is Gain’ (Philippians 1:19-26): Does Paul Contemplate Suicide?”. In it, Croy attacks both Droge and another, D.W. Palmer. Croy claims that “Palmer’s list does not bear up under scrutiny” which he easily dismantles.⁹ After discussing Palmer, Croy then attempts to disprove Droge’s argument for the meaning of the passage.

How Croy does this is by stating that Paul is using the Latin rhetorical device known as *dubitatio*, or “feigned perplexity.” On this rhetorical reading, Paul is feigning perplexity over a divided will.¹⁰ To support this, Croy cites ancient authors who describe the rhetorical trope and who actually use it. One of the texts that Croy cites is the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* by the famous Roman orator, Cicero: “Indecision [*dubatio*] occurs when the speaker seems to ask which of the two or more words he had better use, as follows: ‘At that time the republic suffered exceedingly from – ought I say – the folly of the consuls, or their wickedness, or both.’”¹¹ When he cites the trope being practiced, it reads very similarly to Paul:

“I am at a loss as to what I should do – whether I should speak the truth as on other occasions or be silent, fearing enmity with you. For while it seems better to me to talk about [your errors]... Nevertheless I would be ashamed if I appeared to be more concerned for my own reputation than for the common safety. It is, therefore, my duty and the duty of others who are concerned about the state to choose.”¹²

Picking up the pieces of this bombshell debate is Paul Holloway. In his article “Deliberating Life and Death: Paul’s Tragic *Dubitatio* in Philippians 1:22–26”, published in the *Harvard Theological Review*, he discusses Croy’s usage of the word. In the first sentence of the introduction, Holloway states: “In Phil 1:22–26, the apostle Paul, writing from a Roman prison,

⁹ N Clayton Croy, “To Die is Gain (Philippians 1:19-26): Does Paul Contemplate Suicide?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 no. 3, 522-523.

¹⁰ Croy, “To Die is Gain,” 525.

¹¹ Cicero, *Rhetorica*, in N Clayton Croy, “To Die is Gain (Philippians 1:19-26): Does Paul Contemplate Suicide?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 no. 3, 526.

¹² Croy, “To Die is Gain,” 528.

deliberates whether to take his own life”.¹³ Holloway challenges the main parts of Croy’s argument: “On reflection, however, *dubitatio* seems to capture what Paul is doing only because Croy’s generous definition goes beyond the evidence he adduces” and Croy’s sources never “supports a description of *dubitatio* as ‘uncertainty about what course of action to take.’”¹⁴ To nuance Croy’s argument, Holloway brings more sources to bear on what Croy’s generous definition continued to confuse Holloway.¹⁵

When Holloway begins to discuss Paul, he does use the word *dubitatio*; however, he translates it simply as “perplexity” – not necessarily involving feigning. Then he describes Paul’s use of the rhetorical trope by breaking it down into three segments: “What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? I praise you not!” After he discusses the passage in more detail, Holloway concludes: (1) “Paul’s deliberation takes the form of the popular figure known as *dubitatio* as it developed in ancient epic and drama.”¹⁶ (2) That Paul uses *dubitatio* to let the Philippian church know his actual thinking and feeling.¹⁷ So, Holloway concludes that Paul is using suicidal language in the passage which functions as a way to open up to his audience.

Holloway’s article, builds upon his previous commentary on Philippians (2017), which argues that Philippians is a letter of consolation. On the passage in question, Holloway claims that Paul is using *dubitatio*. Before going into the crux of his exegesis of the passage, Holloway outlines the rhetorical trope in the passage as “1:22-23a Paul’s dilemma: whether to choose life or death; 1:23b-24 Paul’s deliberations: what he desires to do versus what he feels he must do;

¹³ Paul Holloway, “Deliberating Life and Death: Paul’s Tragic *Dubitatio* in Philippians 1:22–26 175,” *Harvard Theological Review* 111 (2018), 175.

¹⁴ Holloway, “Deliberating Life and Death,” 176.

¹⁵ Holloway, “Deliberating Life and Death,” 177, footnote 10.

¹⁶ Holloway, “Deliberating Life and Death,” 190.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

1:25-26 Paul's decision: to choose life so that the Philippians will begin again to make a progress in the faith."¹⁸ This use of rhetoric, Holloway argues, is then transferred to a rebuke that Paul uses to push the Philippians towards joy, the overarching theme of the literary context.¹⁹

The Augustinian Objection to this Argument

One objection that needs addressing, though a strong, if not strongest, one is the fact that Christianity has historically viewed the act of one killing oneself as a sin. Paul thus cannot be contemplating voluntary death because "suicide" is a sin in Christian thinking. Such a theological approach would be anachronistic because there is no evidence that Paul would have viewed suicide as a moral issue. Discussion about this will continue in the argument, but it is important to understand why this would be anachronistic.

The reason why this is anachronistic is because the first ever reference to voluntary death being referenced as a sin comes from the fifth century. Augustine's *City of God*, takes a hard stance against self-killing. Mosaic commandments provide the reference point. Augustine also looked at such biblical references as Samson, because God gave Samson the power to end his own life. With this point, it is clear that self-killing was not at codified as a sin until the time of Augustine, meaning, one cannot use this point to show that Paul would avoid killing himself because of a modern moral view.²⁰

Voluntary Death in the Septuagint (Paul's Bible)

¹⁸ Paul Holloway, *Philippians* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2017), 96

¹⁹ Holloway, *Philippians*, 100-101

²⁰ John C. Bauerschmidt, *Suicide*, in, *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 820.

Before we dive into the Greco-Roman world and how it viewed voluntary death, it is essential that we understand how voluntary death is portrayed in Paul's own Jewish Scripture. The reason is that Paul prided himself for being Jewish, (Gal 1:13f; Phil 3:4-6; 2 Cor 11:22). From this ethnic identity, Paul takes a large portion of his morals and arguments as rooted in scriptures. So, from the Septuagint, we might see an angle on Paul's moral reasoning about voluntary death.²¹

As for the scriptural roots for the idea of voluntary death, the Old Testament surprisingly does not have a clear moral stance for or against it.²² When there are instances of involuntary death, the scripture's authors normally just writes the incidents as part of a narrative and does not put any moral value on the action of self-murder. In Paul's Old Testament, the Septuagint, there are seven examples of individuals killing themselves. The most notable examples are Abimelech and Samson which we will examine closely.

Our first example in the Old Testament is the situation in Judges 9:54 where the text discusses the death of Abimelech. In the book of Judges, Abimelech is viewed as a negative figure who massacred many people in order to gain kingship over Israel (Judges 9). Regarding his death, the text says that God made the relationship between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem so difficult that war breaks out (Judges 9:22-25). This led to Abimelech's forces surrounding the city of Shechem and destroying it (Judges 9:49). After that was complete, Abimelech moved to the city of Thebez and besieged it (Judges 9:50). While that was continuing, a woman from the city threw a rock on Abimelech resulting him to be near death.

²¹ Brain S. Rosner, *Paul Scripture and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5-7*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Pub Group, 1999) 16.

²² Yael Shamesh, "Suicide in the Bible," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37 (2009), 157-158.

This then led him to call out to one of his soldiers to kill him, so he didn't have to possess the shame of being killed by a woman (Judges 9:52-55).²³

This section of the text doesn't place any moral stance towards the actual voluntary death. Instead, the moral issue was Abimelech killing the seventy sons in order to gain power. We see that this is the real moral issue, because the author claims that God had a hand in punishing Abimelech for that deed (Judges 9:22-24). Also, the voluntary death described in the text is portrayed as an honorable way to die, and that it was to avoid having the stigma of being killed by a woman (Judges 9:54). Looking at this, one piece of evidence shows that voluntary death is not a moral issue in the Old Testament.²⁴

Another example is Judges, the story of Samson, but that a brief segment differs from the case of Abimelech. The main difference between the two is that while Abimelech is considered a negative figure, Samson is seen as mostly positive. A reason why was that Samson was a judge, an individual appointed by God to protect the Israelites. As a judge, Samson had a career as a judge and led the Israelites against the Philistines (Judges 15).²⁵

The downfall of Samson involved a prostitute named Delilah, whom he fell for. As the story goes, Delilah was an agent of the Philistines who would ambush Samson while she was seducing him. The plan worked, and Samson was captured by the Philistines who locked him in their temple, which involved chaining him between two pillars. While he was chained, he was given strength to push the pillars down, causing the whole temple to collapse. The result of that,

²³ Buaruch Halpern, "Abimelech," in, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf, John David Pleins, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 20-22.

²⁴ Halpern, "Abimelech," 20-22.

²⁵ James L. Crenshaw, "Samson," in, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf, John David Pleins, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 950-954.

according to the story, is that Samson killed himself along with three-thousand Philistines. The fact is that Samson was a voluntary self-killer (Judges 16).²⁶

The example of Samson, offers a case analogous to that of Abimelech. Someone kills oneself, and the narrator doesn't take any moral stance against the action. In fact, as with Abimelech, the issue of being immoral, involves Samson's sexual relationship with Delilah. Another interesting point is that God gave Samson the strength to kill himself (Judges 16:28-30). There is no evidence at all that Paul would have viewed the story of Samson as something that would negative except for his falling for a foreign woman.²⁷

These are just two examples of the many more which discuss voluntary death in the Old Testament. From these examples and the many others, there is no clear moral issue that arises from the Jewish scriptures. In order to find to see if Paul had a moral issue with this, we must look elsewhere.

Plato and the concept of ἀνάγκη

Understanding the literary culture of Paul requires attention to the philosopher Plato. The impact of Plato cannot be overstated because it was from him that stemmed many intellectual traditions in Paul's Roman world. Though we could delve into every aspect of Plato's impact in his world, the discussion of voluntary death is what we are going to analyze. To do this, we have to look at the most essential book regarding this topic, the *Phaedo*.

The *Phaedo* is a dialogue between two individuals, Echecrates and Phaedo, who are discussing the death of Socrates. Echecrates wants to know what took place on the night that

²⁶ Crenshaw, "Samson," 950-954.

²⁷ Crenshaw, "Samson," 953-954.

Socrates died, and Phaedo (who was there) tells him (56-57): When Socrates' disciples came to him, they attempted to convince him to escape from the death sentence of drinking hemlock. Socrates, however, surprises his disciples by saying that he was going to stay in prison and go through with the execution because it was a divine "necessity."²⁸

The Platonic Socrates in the *Phaedo* argues that self-killing requires the gods to send a necessity (ἀνάγκη) to do so. This is best seen when Socrates and Cebes are debating on the morals of voluntary death: "Then perhaps from this point of view it isn't illogical that one shouldn't do away with oneself before some god (τινὰ θεός) sends some necessity (ἀνάγκην), such as the one we now face (Ἴσως τοίνυν ταύτη οὐκ ἄλογον μὴ πρότερον αὐτὸν ἀποκτείνοναι δεῖν, πρὶν ἀνάγκην τινὰ θεὸς ἐπιπέμψῃ, ὥσπερ καὶ τὴν νῦν ἡμῖν παροῦσαν.)"²⁹ As we see from this section of the *Phaedo*, from the perspective of Plato's Socrates, the question of whether or not one should kill oneself should depend on whether or not the divine provides a reason for one to do so.

This theme connects to other sections of the *Phaedo*, where Socrates asserts humans not to be their own masters; the gods are our owners in a master-slave property relation. As with the whole *Phaedo*, the dialogue is between Socrates and his stubborn disciple Cebes. It states:

"'Well indeed,' said Socrates, 'put in this way it would seem illogical, however it doesn't mean it doesn't have some sort of sense perhaps. Now the story told in the secret writings about these things, that we humans are in a kind of prison and one must not release oneself or run away from it, seems to me an important one and is not easy to understand. However, Cebes, I do think the following is well argued: that it is the gods who have regard for us and that we humans are one of the gods' possessions. Or do you not agree with this?'"³⁰

²⁸ Emily Wilson, *The Death of Socrates* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007), 78.

²⁹ Plato, *Phaedo* 62C, Edited and translated by Christopher Emlyn-Jones, William Preddy, Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

³⁰ Plato, *Phaedo* 62B, tans. LCL.

From this reference, Socrates is explaining that the human body (σῶμα) is in a sort of prison (σῆμα) and that the best thing a soul could do is to depart the prison. Though this would be a good thing, the gods have ownership over humans who don't have the rights to make the decision when to depart. This is further expanded in the following section: “‘So,’ he said, ‘in your case too if one of your possessions were to destroy itself without you indicating that you wanted it to die, wouldn't you be angry with it and, if you had some means of punishment, punish it?’”³¹ With these sections, we see more and more Socrates' view of voluntary death as divine service even slavery.

Analyzing this passage of the *Phaedo* shows it is the concept of a divine ἀνάγκη which dictates whether or not one departs this world. This isn't an isolated example, another is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which was written as a response to his teacher Plato. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle takes a hard stance against one killing oneself, to the point that he claims it is an unjust action (*Nicomachean Ethics*, xi 1-4). Yet Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, agrees that divine ἀνάγκη dictates whether or not justice is achieved: “justice and injustice always necessarily [ἀνάγκη] imply more than one person.”³² With this passage of Aristotle, we see that “necessity” is a concept that Aristotle applies to justice which is directly applied to one killing himself.

As we continue our study, the usage of necessity is a common theme throughout the Greco-Roman world. This concept will also be seen in Hellenistic Judaism as we analyze the Jewish side of Paul. A final note to bring up is that even ἀνάγκη and the theme of departure from

³¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 62C, Loeb.

³² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, xi 5, Translated by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926).

prison is used in Paul's rhetoric in Philippians which brings evidence that Paul is communicating voluntary death in his letter.

The Stoics and Their View on Voluntary Death

In the Roman empire during Paul's time, the predominant philosophical group of the time was the Stoics. Stoic teachers had prestigious spots in society, such as, Seneca being the tutor of Nero. The founding of the school of thought was in the fourth century BCE with a man named Zeno who became a large figure of reference in Stoic literature. The main focus of Stoicism revolves around the idea that a person should govern his or her life in a "correct" way. This normally refers to self-controlled behavior to which ideas of voluntary death belong. Understanding how the Stoics viewed voluntary death is essential to understanding how Paul viewed it, because Paul's context in this period.³³

When regarding whether or not one should kill them self, each Stoic teacher had his own view on the ethics to do so. A common theme that were between all of them was that they sought to make every action, including voluntary death, in line with reason (λόγος). The Stoic philosopher Chrysippus viewed there were adequate times for a wise and foolish person to take their life.³⁴ Another Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, had similar views to this where he stated that if an individual was in extreme poverty to the point they could not provide for their needs, then it would be reasonable for the to kill themselves.³⁵

³³ F.H. Sandbach, *The Stoics*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1989), 14-16.

³⁴ Arthur J. Droge, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Jews and Christians in Antiquity*, (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 30.

³⁵ Gretchen Reydam-Schils, *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005), 46.

An interesting point that can be gathered from Roman Stoics was that there seemed to be a connection to the *Phaedo* and their views on voluntary death. Gretchen Reydam-Schils makes this clear in her book, *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection*, where she describes the Platonic influence on the Stoics. Two suicides that Reydam-Schils references are Tacitus and Seneca. With these two examples, she claims that their deaths strikingly resemble the death of the Platonic Socrates.³⁶

When discussing the Stoics and voluntary death, the premier one to discuss is the Seneca, the tutor of Emperor Nero. When Nero fired Seneca from his job as being Nero's advisor, he killed himself for being so distraught with life. Before that, we have several writings from him regarding voluntary death. One collaboration of his works titled the *Moral Epistles*, Seneca discusses issues like death and self-killing, and the correct way to do it. In one of the epistles, he describes how as a young man he had the desire to kill himself because of a painful illness which shows that voluntary death was a personal topic to him.³⁷ Of Seneca's outward examples, he praises individuals as brave and noble who take their life for issues like old age:

“It's fitting for you to experience pain, and thirst, and hunger, and old age – if, that is a long delay in the human world befalls you – and illness, and loss, and death... But you do know, at least, how many have found death helpful; how many it has released from tortures, poverty, lamentation, punishment, fatigue. We are in no one's power, if death is in our power.”³⁸

The final line of the passage is key: “if death is in our power” Seneca argues that the individual is powerful when death is in his own hands.

³⁶ Retdams-Schilis, *The Roman Stoics*, 45-46.

³⁷ Seneca the Younger, Epistle 54, read in, *How to Die: An Ancient Guide to the End of Life*, trans. James S. Room (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 3-7.

³⁸ Seneca the Younger, *Epistle* 91.18-21, read in, *How to Die: An Ancient Guide to the End of Life*, trans. James S. Room (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 30-31.

Roman Literary Tradition on Voluntary Death

One final point with our analysis concerning voluntary death in the Roman world is their literary tradition. When analyzing this, there are two specific examples that I would like to bring forth in my argument, the deaths of Lucretia and of Cato. The reason why I want to bring this forth is that they are famous figures in the literary tradition who participated in voluntary death. They show how the literary elite viewed the act of self-killing as a noble death. This evidence contextualizes Paul because he participated in the education of the Greco-Roman world.

The first example is the case of Lucretia from Livy's *History of Rome*. It is important to note that this event is seen as a legend in the modern eye; however, the Romans, primarily Livy, viewed it as their own history, which is why it is under this particular classification. The story goes as follows Lucretia, wife of Collatinus, was a noble wife and a diligent worker. An Etruscan Noble, Sextus Tarquinius, raped her because he was seduced by her character. The event was so degrading for Lucretia that she ended up taking her own life out of shame. The event in Livy is described like this:

““It is for you to determine,” she answers, “what is due to him; for my own part, though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; nor in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia.” Taking a knife which she had concealed beneath her dress, she plunged it into her heart, and sinking forward upon the wound, died as she fell. The wail for the dead was raised by her husband and her father.” (Livy, *History of Rome*, 1.1)

Lucretia is doing this act as of self-killing as a way to make up for her “sin” as she is understanding it. So, in a way, she is doing an honorable deed that is morally justified. Her rape

and self-killing led to the Roman revolt against the Etruscans, which brought high moral value to Lucretia's noble death.³⁹

The case of Cato the Younger follows this same pattern. To bring context, Cato was a statesman during the time of the Roman civil war between Caesar and Pompey. During the civil war, Cato retreated to Utica, a town in modern day Tunisia, where he killed himself. The main text that describes this incident is Plutarch's *Life of Cato*, where he describes the whole night which the act took place. In the text, Plutarch states that Cato read Plato's *Phaedo* the night that he committed the act and that he wanted to do it because of fear of being caught by Caesar (Plutarch, *Cato the Younger*, LXVIII- LXIX). The description of the actual event is as follows:

“But when Butus had gone out, Cato drew his sword from its sheath and stabbed himself below the breast. His thrust, however, was somewhat feeble, owing to the inflammation in his hand, and so he did not at once dispatch himself, but in his death struggle fell from the couch and made a loud noise by overturning a geometrical abacus that stood near. His servants heard the noise and cried out, and his son at once ran in, together with his friends.” (Plutarch, *Cato the Younger*, LXX trans. LCL).

Plutarch describes no clear moral dilemma. In fact, it is seen as reasonable thing from Cato's perspective. Evidence of this comes from book seventy where Plutarch claims that Cato said that killing himself with result in him being his own master (Plutarch, *Life of Cato*, LXX).⁴⁰

Voluntary Death in Hellenistic Judaism

Paul's contemporaneous context includes not only Roman culture but also Hellenistic Judaism. In some cases, the understanding of this facet of Paul is more important than the Old Testament because it was closer to Paul's reading of scripture. For this section, we will primarily look at the examples of 1 and 2 Maccabees and how they view voluntary death. The other

³⁹ Eleanor Glendinning, “Reinventing Lucretia: Rape, Suicide and Redemption from Classical Antiquity to the Medieval Era,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 20 (2013), 63-68.

⁴⁰ Alexi V. Zadorojnyi, “Cato's Suicide in Plutarch,” *Classical Quarterly* 57 (2007), 216.

notable passage is Josephus' *Jewish Wars*, but the instance is so complex that it will need its own section.

1 Maccabees has several sections that discuss voluntary death with some being more magnificent than others. One was in 6:43-46, a text on the battle at Beit Zechariah. During the battle, the opposing forces of Antiochus V Eupator had war elephants that they were using against the Jewish forces. At that point, a Jew named Eleazar suspected that a war elephant was carrying Antiochus V Eupator, so he ran under it and killed it. That then led to the elephant falling on him and killing him. With this case, it shows that self-sacrifice was a noble death, it was noble because Eleazar is portrayed as a heroic figure in the text.⁴¹

A second point to examine is a case in 2 Maccabees where it discusses the family of seven brothers. Seven brothers and their mother are captured, tortured and then commanded to eat pork. The family, despite the sufferings that were inflicted upon them, refused to eat pork which caused Antiochus IV Epiphanes to kill them all. As with the previous example, the family that is mentioned are portrayed as heroes who nobly died:

“The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman’s reasoning with a man’s courage, and said to them, ‘I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws.’” (2 Macc. 7:20-23, NRSV).

As with these examples showed, it seems that the Maccabean texts do not have a negative stance on voluntary death. Indeed, we find the very opposite: the text celebrates voluntary death

⁴¹ Roger Tones, “Heroism in 1 and 2 Maccabees,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007), 172-76.

as heroic. The Maccabean texts invest martyrdom with high moral value, even nobility. There is one Hellenistic Jewish author, however, who subverts such a theme: Josephus in his *Jewish War*.⁴²

Josephus and ἀνάγκη

In the first century CE, Josephus witnessed much of the catastrophe of the Jewish War against Rome. Josephus witnessed the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, during the siege of Jerusalem. In this catastrophic context, Josephus writes about individual's killing themselves and questions/challenges the morality of the deed. This is important to our study of Paul, because there are some similarities between the two. First, they both were Pharisees and their works are the only confirmed works to be written by that sect of Judaism. Second, they were both given a strong education in the Greco-Roman style. Third, they lived in the same century which means they would have known of the same events, such as, the death of Jesus.

When discussing voluntary death, there are two instances that Josephus mentions that contextualizes a noble death with Socrates. Before we begin, we have to understand Josephus' bias towards the act is negative because he is, in a way, defending himself. We can infer that because of the first example we will use from Josephus, *The Jewish War*: Book III, refers to him refusing to kill himself. How the narrative goes is that after the Jewish forces lost the battle of Yodfat, Josephus and his companions escape to a cave. After that instance, the Roman forces tracked them down and surrounded the cave. Josephus' companions refused to be captured by the Romans so one, Nicanor, suggested that they all kill themselves. Josephus initially agreed but after all had died, Josephus changed his mind. He later writes that he had refused to participate in

⁴² Ibid, 172-76.

the act and attempted to convince them against it: “Josephus, fearing an assault, and holding that it would be a betrayal of God’s commands, should he die before delivering his message, proceeded, in this emergency [ἀνάγκη], to reason philosophically with them.” (*J.W.* 3.5 trans. LCL). Even though Josephus attempted to convince his friends, he didn’t succeed. They drew straws to see who would kill who, and Josephus was the last man.⁴³

What is fascinating about this passage is that there is a linguistic link to Socrates in this story. The linguistic link is Josephus’ use of ἀνάγκη to describe whether voluntary death was necessary. Recall that Plato used this word to explain why Socrates was going to commit a voluntary death. (Also, Paul uses it to show why he decided to stay in the flesh.) In this case, however, Josephus uses ἀνάγκη to explain why he and his companions should not kill themselves. Josephus still connects voluntary death to a dramatic trope, even as he rejects self-killing.

More evidence of a Socratic tradition appears in the *Jewish War*. Its usage of ἀνάγκη and voluntary death is referred several times in the speech by Eleazar during the battle of Masada. To provide context for the speech: it happened after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem at the fortress of Masada. At the fortress Eleazar, his forces, and their families were trapped there when the Romans besieged it. To keep the people from being enslaved by the Romans, Eleazar attempted to convince them to perform a mass suicide. Though there is no evidence that these were Eleazar’s exact words, this is important because we see how Josephus composes the scene as a Socratic Death by using ἀνάγκη into the speech.⁴⁴

⁴³ Nicole Kelley, “The Cosmopolitan Expression of Josephus’s Prophetic Perspective in the *Jewish War*” *Harvard Theological Review* 97 (2004), 257-59.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

In the speech, ἀνάγκη is used four times and in some cases, it is used the same way that the Platonic Socrates used it. The first instance that is used is early on in the speech where he attempts to bring God into the group's situation:

“But did we forsooth hope that we alone of all the Jewish nation would survive and preserve our freedom, as persons guiltless towards God and without a hand in crime—we who had even been the instructors of the rest? Mark, now, how He [God] exposes the vanity of our expectations, by visiting us with such dire distress [ἀνάγκην] as exceeds all that we could anticipate.” (*J.W.* 7.6 trans. LCL).

This first example highlights how Josephus' version of Eleazar uses ἀνάγκη. We see that there is a connection with God's wish, or expectation, and how there is a necessity for it to be carried out. Another important note to this is that we see that there is an importance in obeying God's commands, even when the command is for someone to kill them self.

As the speech continues, Eleazar of Josephus begins to construct an argument for a noble death, by discussing how it is an honor for them to kill themselves. He also begins speaking about the soul and how it is almost of a shame for it to be inside of the body (*J.W.* 7.7 trans. LCL). As Eleazar does this, he brings in an example of Indian philosophers who, out of divine “necessity,” refuse to release the soul from the body by killing themselves:

“let us look at those Indians who profess the practice of philosophy. They, brave men that they are, reluctantly endure the period of life, as some necessary [ἀναγκαίαν] service due to nature, but hasten to release their souls from their bodies; and though no calamity impels nor drives them from the scene, from sheer longing for the immortal state, they announce to their comrades that they are about to depart. Nor is there any who would hinder them: no, all felicitate them and each gives them commissions to his loved ones; so certain and absolutely sincere is their belief in the intercourse which souls hold with one another.” (*J.W.* 7.7 trans. LCL).

When someone analyzes this passage from the speech, Josephus' version of Eleazar is doing a direct allusion to Socrates. When we go back to Socrates in the *Phaedo*, Socrates stated that an individual should not kill themselves unless the gods provide some necessity [ἀνάγκη] to do so.

The Indian philosophers, have a necessity [ἀναγκαίαν] not to kill themselves, even though it would be a good thing for them to do so.⁴⁵

A final point of the speech is more shocking, because “Eleazar” brings in the wish/command of God to convince the people to participate in voluntary death:

“Yet, even had we from the first been schooled in the opposite doctrine and taught that man highest blessing is life and that death is a calamity, still the crisis is one that calls upon us to bear it with a stout heart, since it is by God’s will and of necessity [ἀνάγκας] that we are to die. For long since, so it seems, God passed this decree against the whole Jewish race in common, that we must quit this life if we would not use it aright. Do not attach the blame to yourselves, nor the credit to the Romans, that this war with them has been the ruin of us all; for it was not their might that brought these things to pass, but the intervention of some more powerful cause has afforded them the semblance of victory.” (J.W. 7.7 trans: LCL)

This example is important because, in a sense, “Eleazar” is using a Socratic principle. The “necessity” that they should die because it is the will of God. This is important with thinking about Paul because he also used such language to say why he would stay in the flesh. So, the take-away from this speech is that there is a correlation between divine “necessity” and the act of self-killing on the direct literary and philosophical model of a Socratic death.⁴⁶

Analyzing Eleazar’s speech, shows that ἀνάγκη is a prevalent theme even in ancient Judaism; however, it isn’t the last time the concept is used when referring to Masada. The last reference to Masada and ἀνάγκη is when Josephus is describing the aftermath of the mass suicide. When describing the horror of the thousands dead at Masada, Josephus states that the individuals “accomplished their purpose [ἀνάγκης]” (J.W. 7.8). When concluding his thoughts about the Jews in Masada who took their own life, Josephus describes them as “wretched victims of necessity [ἀνάγκης]” (J.W. 7.8). Josephus argues that the group who preformed the suicide at

⁴⁵ Droge, *A Noble Death*, 93-95.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 93-95.

Masada did it because of ἀνάγκη. This goes to show that, in Josephus' thinking, that ἀνάγκη is the overarching causality of a just death, even if tragic.

In conclusion to this assessment, Josephus views ἀνάγκη as connected to the concept of voluntary death. The three events that connect are: Josephus' defense, Eleazar's speech, and Josephus's view of the victims all show that it is a common theme that is synonymous to individuals killing themselves. Even more important, there is a direct connection to the Platonic use of that word. This shows that the idea of ἀνάγκη was prevalent on a broader cultural context than just in Platonist philosophy. Finally, this is also important because Paul was an educated Hellenistic Jew as well, which Josephus was as well.

Exegesis of Philippians 1:21-26

Ἐμοὶ γὰρ τὸ ζῆν Χριστὸς καὶ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν κέρδος. εἰ δὲ τὸ ζῆν ἐν σαρκί, τοῦτο μοι καρπὸς ἔργου, καὶ τί αἰρήσομαι οὐ γνωρίζω. συνέχομαι δὲ ἐκ τῶν δύο, τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν ἔχων εἰς τὸ ἀναλῦσαι καὶ σὺν Χριστῷ εἶναι, πολλῶ [γὰρ] μᾶλλον κρεῖσσον· τὸ δὲ ἐπιμένειν [ἐν] τῇ σαρκὶ ἀναγκαιότερον δι' ὑμᾶς. καὶ τοῦτο πεποιθῶς οἶδα ὅτι μενῶ καὶ παραμενῶ πᾶσιν ὑμῖν εἰς τὴν ὑμῶν προκοπὴν καὶ χαρὰν τῆς πίστεως, ἵνα τὸ καύχημα ὑμῶν περισσεύῃ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ διὰ τῆς ἐμῆς παρουσίας πάλιν πρὸς ὑμᾶς.

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. (Phil. 1:21-26)

The pericope begins with the statement “living is Christ and dying is gain” [NRSV]. That phrase puts a value on death by calling it a “gain” [κέρδος] which is more valuable than living with Christ, Paul at that moment further explains what will happen if he stays in the flesh, a “fruitful labor.” Paul then writes that he has a choice in the matter and that he is torn between the two options. He considers the option that he prefers, to “depart,” which he describes as “very much better by far.” Later, he describes why he is going to stay in the flesh because it is a fruitful

labor which is for the sake of the Philippian church. He then solidifies that decision by saying he will continue to remain with them for the “progress of joy in faith” which will help him come and see him again.

Though the passage may seem to come out of nowhere, in fact, it is a part of Paul’s wider pattern of thought. A reason for that is the implementation of the particle γάρ (for) which functions as a link to the other pericopes: “to introduce the reason: when the reason precedes that of which it is the reason.”⁴⁷ So, Paul is using this passage in a way to discuss what he talked about in Philippians 1:15-20. Also, the rhetorical use of Ἐμοὶ γὰρ (for I) can be seen as powerful because it personalizes the struggle and the previous passage that Paul describes.⁴⁸

In the pericope, Paul is placing moral value on the idea of death but greater moral value in helping his friends. This is from the beginning statement “living is Christ and dying is gain” (Phil. 1:21 NRSV). In Paul Holloway’s commentary, verse twenty-one is more connected to Philippians 1:18c-20 than Philippians 1:22-26. The reason why is that, the phrase is a *clausula*, a concluding thought, of verses 18c through 20 where Paul is presenting a common expression for the time. Nevertheless, the next section does have some connection to it because it discusses Paul’s desire to depart from the flesh.⁴⁹

The reason why verse 21 has a connection to verse 22 is that the whole section of Philippians 1:22-26 discusses Paul having an issue with choosing life and death. In the beginning of the rest of the section, is verse 22 “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer” (Phil 1:22 NRSV). In this verse, Paul is laying out a choice

⁴⁷ Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 138.

⁴⁸ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 81.

⁴⁹ Paul Holloway, *Philippians*, 94.

between two options, whether to live in the flesh or to depart and be with Christ. As Paul lays out the choice, Paul describes even more that the decision is a difficult one.

We see this in the “I [Paul] am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil 1:23). With this verse, we see that Paul is expressing his “desire” to leave the flesh. Though this is an adequate translation, the word that Paul uses for desire, ἐπιθυμίαν, can also be rendered as “lust.” How “lust” can be a better translation is Paul’s usage of “flesh” and how that normally has a negative connotation in Pauline literature. Arthur J. Droge takes this translation even further by stating that Paul is saying he has a “lust for death.”⁵⁰

The idea of the departing from the body being a good thing is not isolated to Philippians. The place where this is also seen is in 2 Corinthians 5:1-8:

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling— if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” (2 Cor 5:1-8)

From this passage we see a further example of Paul expressing life outside the body, with the Lord, being a better existence than staying on earth. It seems that this is a common thread in Paul’s thinking that the body is, in a way, a prison from being with ultimate desire which is to be with Christ. This goes to Philippians 1:21-23, where it shows that Paul’s expression is likely

⁵⁰ Arthur J. Droge, “Mori Lucrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide,” *Novum Testamentum* 30.3 (July 1988), 282.

Socratic. Also, his imprisonment may have intensified the use of the Platonic theme because Socrates was imprisoned as well.

From the current exegesis, we see that Paul has a desire to depart from the world and be with Christ. The desire can be translated as “lust” which can heighten the possibility of him thinking of ending his life. Despite all of this, Paul expresses why he didn’t make the choice to depart and be with Christ, which evident in verse 24: “yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake” (Philippians 1:24). From that passage, Paul is expressing that he chose to stay in the flesh because it is better for the Philippians. This, in a way, is rejecting selfishness for the greater “necessity,” which would be for Paul to sacrifice for his friends. For this, Paul writes this is utterly necessary for him to stay in flesh. The usage of the word “more necessary” (ἀναγκαιότερον) participates in the Socratic ‘Noble Death’ tradition in Greco-Roman literary culture.⁵¹

If we go back to our discussion of Socrates, then we can see a correlation between Paul and the Greco-Roman world through Paul’s use of ἀναγκαιότερον: How this is connected is by the root of the word, being ἀνάγκη, and how Socrates used it to show why he chose to kill himself. In Paul’s case, ἀνάγκη is used as his reason not to depart with Christ because it was for the sake of the Philippians (Phil. 1:24), which was the opposite conclusion as the Platonic Socrates. Looking at the other references, such as Josephus, we see a pattern of this word being used when discussing voluntary death, which gives us the possibility that Paul is expressing a desire to kill himself.

⁵¹ Holloway, *Philippians*, 97-101.

The conclusion of this passage brings in more clarity that Paul had a choice in whether or not he stays in the flesh. It's the basic words, "convinced of this," shows that he expresses the mental decision to stay in the flesh. This belief also convinces him that he will meet the Philippians again: "I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith" (Philippians 1:25). With this, we see that Paul is expressing the end to his decision to not end his life and the outcome that entails.

In conclusion to this section, the language that Paul is expressing makes it seem like he is imitating Socrates in contemplating taking his own life. For one, he is placing death as a gain which he claims that it is better than living. Second, he states that he has a decision in the matter and that he is "hard-pressed" between the two options. Going from that, he has a conclusion that he will not end his life but will continue on because it is "more necessary." From this close and contextual reading of the passage, I conclude that Paul likely fashions himself after the Platonic Socrates but comes to a conclusion very opposite of that in Plato's story.

Contextualizing Philippians 1:21-27 with its Broader World

Now that we have brought all of these pieces together, how does Philippians contextualize with the broader Greco-Roman world? We will answer this by looking at aspects we have discussed, in order to see how our passage fits into it. First, we will analyze the aspects of the Greco-Roman World, then we will analyze Judaism, finally, we will look at ἀνάγκη. We will bring in all of the evidence together to explain why it will be reasonable to believe that Paul is expressing a Socratic desire to kill himself.

When bringing up the examples of the Greco-Roman world, it is clear that in the literary culture, a person killing oneself was seen as a moral good. When we look at Lucretia, the moral

issue wasn't her killing herself, but it was the shame of her being sexually violated which caused the voluntary death. With the case of Cato, he killed himself because he wanted to accept his own fate, despite the fact that Cato failed in his endeavors and needed assistance, which would be seen as shameful. Nevertheless when Paul was writing to the Philippians, the literary culture of his day would not have viewed one killing oneself as a negative issue.

That culture included philosophy, which had varying views on the act. The two philosophical schools that we looked at were the Platonic school and the Stoic reinterpretation of Plato. The reason why we looked at these was because of the prevalence they had in the Greco-Roman world. As we looked at those, we saw that they didn't necessarily have a moral stance against it. In the case of the Stoics, what was most important was for the individual to live with reason (logos) and in self-controlled acceptance of fate (ἀνάγκη), and to kill himself according to that reason. Plato, on the other hand, uses the idea of that one should only kill oneself if there is a divine "necessity" [ἀνάγκη] to do so. When this is in relation to Paul, the dominant philosophical schools of his day didn't have an immediate negative view of voluntary death. This implies that Paul would not have been exposed to the idea of a voluntary death being morally "wrong" while writing the book of Philippians.

The other point is how broad Jewish responses to the act of killing oneself were. There is no clear Scripture against it. In the Old Testament there are references to self-killing but, each narrative paints it as a heroic act instead of placing any moral value to it. In Hellenistic Judaism, there is a clear praise of those who participate in it sacrificially as in the case of martyrs in Maccabean stories. With this, the Maccabean story does have a clear moral stance on those who kill themselves out of something other than being self-sacrificial. This Jewish evidence helps to

provide a context for Philippians by putting Paul in his immediate culture and that culture's value.

The final part of contextualizing Philippians is Paul's use of ἀναγκαιότερον in the passage. This trope goes back to Socrates and it is seen throughout Greek language literature such as Josephus. It is also seen in Latin texts such as Scipio Africanus when in a dream a deity came to him to tell him that he shouldn't kill himself because he has greater purpose to do so (Cicero, *The Republic*, VI). The example of Josephus, however, is the most striking because he is a Jewish author who seems to understand the Socratic use of ἀνάγκη. So, from this, it seems that in Paul's world, ἀνάγκη is synonymous with the voluntary death.

Scholarship's Fight for the Interpretation and My Contribution

When deciding on what the passage means, scholars have attempted to figure it out since the 1980s, however, the debate on one killing themselves being a sin goes back even further. The original codifier of this being a sin would be Augustine in the fifth century CE and from then on. Augustine wasn't promoting this view for purely scriptural reasons for he was interested in ending the Donatist movement within the Church. How Augustine did it was infusing Neo-Platonic into the Mosaic commandment in order to make a case against one to kill themselves.

To elaborate, Donatism was created in the 4th century in North Africa by a man named Donatus. The main controversy that Augustine was addressing was the fact that the Donatist would self-martyr themselves out of a worship of God. This led to Augustine creating parts of *The City of God* to counteract one killing oneself. In regard to the Donatist movement, while the

Donatists claimed that they were participating in being martyrs, Augustine claimed that they were participating in a sinful suicide.⁵²

Though the issue of “suicide” as immoral was settled in the Augustinian era, recent modern scholarship has been in a debate over the meaning of passage. Droge was the first modern scholar since John Donne to propose this hypothesis, which, understandably, created debate in the academic field. He was also the first to propose that Paul may be referencing Socratic principles. Droge, *The Noble Death*, contributed to this discussion by claiming that Augustine was the one that made voluntary death a moral issue in the ancient world. Droge also states that Augustine was ineptly wrong. Implicitly, Croy tries to defend Augustine’s theology indirectly by introducing the rhetorical trope *dubitatio* when he discusses what is happening in the text. He does this to neutralize Droge’s argument and he also debates Droge’s translations as well stating that it is very misleading.

Though Croy attempts to back his statement, his direct arguments to discredit Droge’s argument have little to no weight. The first instance of Croy discrediting Droge is with his translation of “my desire is to depart” (Phil. 1:23) to “lust for death.”⁵³ How this does not have any weight is that Croy barely makes an argument for why it is wrong. In fact, he only uses one argument to go against Droge:

“It is misleading for three reasons. (1) The object of ἐπιθυμία (“depart and be with Christ”) argues against the sensationalistic rendering “lust.” The translation “lust” or “craving” is appropriate for ἐπιθυμία when the desire is immoderate or its object is something forbidden. The fact that ἐπιθυμία usually means “lust” in other Pauline contexts is irrelevant. (Note, for example, that σάρξ, which often has a strongly negative connotation in Paul, is neutral in 1:22.) (2) Paul does not say he has a desire for “death,” but uses a picturesque and euphemistic word ἀναλῦσαι, “to depart.” Elsewhere this verb is used for the action of breaking camp and moving on or of weighing anchor and sailing

⁵² *Augustine through the Ages*, 284-286 & 820.

⁵³ Croy, “To Die is Gain,” 524.

away. (3) Finally, what Paul desires is not simply to depart but also “to be with Christ.” The unity of the departure and the union with Christ are evident from the single Greek article with two infinitives. There is, then, little merit in Droge’s translation, and his thesis in general contravenes Paul’s strong affirmation of Christian life as joyful, particularly in this epistle.⁵⁴

The main thing that is problematic in this passage is the argument over the translation of ἐπιθυμία. From a basic definition from a lexicon, the word can have negative or neutral intentions. The definition from a Greek lexicon is “*a desire, yearning, longing* : in bad sense, *desire lust*,”⁵⁵ which means that it depends on the context of the phrase. To Croy, the crux of his linguistic argument goes down to whether σάρξ is in a negative context. In Croy’s paragraph, he gives no evidence at all to support that σάρξ is either in a negative or neutral context, meaning there is no reason to trust that his opinion has any weight. One final point to this paragraph is that he only uses one source to describe this case and the source that he used would have been out of date for his time.⁵⁶

The one source that was used by Croy was Peter T. O’Brien’s 1991 commentary *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Here, O’Brien claims that τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν is not in the negative context and should be translated as “desire.” O’Brien then further states that the word has a positive connotation:

“Here ἐπιθυμία has a positive connotation, signifying a particularly strong desire on the part of the apostle (the definite article τὴν [ἐπιθυμίαν] has the significance of the possessive ‘my’), a longing for that which he earnestly and continuously (if the present tense of ἔχον, ‘having’, is pressed) desired. The prepositional phrase εἰς τὸ ἀναλῦσαι καὶ σὺν Χριστῷ εἶναι indicates grammatically the direction of the apostle’s strong desire”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Croy, “To Die is Gain,” 524.

⁵⁵ *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 252.

⁵⁶ Croy “To Die is Gain,” 524.

⁵⁷ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 129.

The error in Croy's usage of this is that he does not elaborate on O'Brien's commentary at all and he just cites it as truth. Also, Croy never states why he is right and Droge is wrong which creates much unreliability in Croy's assertion. Finally, this does not advance Croy's argument that Paul was not expressing language of self-killing. In fact, it still assists Droge because the word is being used as Paul having a "strong desire."⁵⁸ Expressing that Paul is experiencing a "strong desire" towards departing and being with Christ gives more credit to Droge's argument that Paul is wanting to make the choice of leaving the flesh.⁵⁹

A stronger case against Croy's objection is his usage of *dubitatio* which is the foundation of his argument. In his article, he describes the word as "feigned perplexity" which basically means that Paul is lying about having the desire to kill himself. How Croy's argument breaks down is on sources and translation. The first part, sources, is that he makes a reference in explanation of *dubitatio* that is counterproductive to his argument. The reason why is that the author of one of the articles, James L. Jaquette, is in support of Droge's argument. The article "A Not-So-Noble Death: Figured Speech, Friendship and Suicide in Philippians 1:21-26" is attempting to understand why Paul doesn't bluntly state that he wants to kill himself.⁶⁰ To explain this, Jaquette uses different types of rhetoric used in Paul's day, one being *dubitatio*. Though he uses it, he only mentions it briefly to describe what it is, so Croy didn't have much weight in this article.⁶¹ The final point to emphasize is that Jaquette supports Droge's argument:

"The weaknesses of Droge's controversial thesis are eliminated by the arguments advanced above. The controversial nature of suicide in antiquity provides the key to Paul's allusive rhetoric in Phil 1:21-26. Rhetoricians and letter writers had at their disposal a variety of ways to treat problematic issues or to deal with situations where

⁵⁸ O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 129.

⁵⁹ Croy, "To Die is Gain," 524.

⁶⁰ James L. Jaquette, "A Not-So-Noble Death: Figured Speech, Friendship and Suicide in Philippians 1:21-26," *Neotestamentica* 28 (1994), 177-179.

⁶¹ Jaquette, "A Not-So-Noble Death," 183.

caution was necessary. Figured speech was on to the preferred means... All the clues to the nature of Paul's deliberations in Phil 1:21-26 fall into place when we understand that Paul's rhetoric is figured."⁶²

A second problem in Croy's argument is his definition of *dubitatio*. As previously stated, Croy defines the *dubitatio* as "feigned perplexity" where a writer is being hesitant to produce a "strengthening or dramatizing an argument."⁶³ In order to make the point that Paul is using *dubitatio*, Croy brings in examples of Cicero and other rhetoricians.⁶⁴ Though the sources are comparable, the issue is in the translation. A prime example of this is from Paul Holloway's article where he discusses the term and translates it "perplexity."⁶⁵ Holloway even goes as far to state that Croy's translation is "not without problems."⁶⁶ With this in mind, Croy's translation has some possible errors from other scholars and with the issue of his other point, it is clear that he can be a little sloppy with sources.

Paul Holloway, on the other hand, attempts to bring Droge and Croy together and claims that Paul is using *dubitatio*, but he also acknowledges that the text does read as Droge stated it to be. How Holloway does this is by bringing the two articles together and states that Paul uses this trope to get the Philippians into his thought process. He also uses this to:

"model the kind of calm and reasoned altruism he wishes to see in the Philippians going forward. And second, it allows him to gently and hopefully inoffensively call attention to the fact that the Philippians have failed to address their grief over his imprisonment and possible execution and are now, as a result, no longer making "progress" in the faith. Paul will urge the Philippians to correct this failure in the hortatory digression that immediately follows in 1:27–2:16."⁶⁷

⁶² Jaquette, "A Not-So-Noble-Death," 190.

⁶³ Croy, "To Die is Gain," 525.

⁶⁴ Croy, "To Die is Gain," 526.

⁶⁵ Holloway, "Deliberating Life and Death" 174.

⁶⁶ Holloway, "Deliberating Life and Death" 177, footnote 10.

⁶⁷ Holloway, "Deliberating Life and Death," 191.

With this, Holloway is acknowledging Droge's article but still implementing the obvious use of *dubitatio*. He is also stating that Paul uses this vulnerability to push the Philippians forward to act better. So, Paul is doing this to calm the Philippians and to show them the right way to handle their grief.

The article just referenced, by Holloway, is a direct response to Droge and Croy but uses the same argument that Holloway used in his 2017 commentary. In his commentary, Holloway states similar things, but he describes what *dubitatio* is and states how it functions.

“The figure *dubitatio* is already attested in Homer, where it takes the form of a deliberative monologue placed in the mouth of a hero faced with a life-or-death dilemma. It serves to dramatize the hero's decision making and in so doing reveal something of his character when it is finally expressed in his choice. The figure falls into three parts: (1) the hero's acknowledgment of his dilemma, typically with a cry of despair (“Ah me!”) that may be further dramatized with a desperate rhetorical question... (2) his impassioned deliberation of alternatives (“if... if”), all of which are bad; and finally (3) his decisions to accept death with honor versus life with shame... The three-part form remains unchanged, except that the initial desperate question, which is now standard, is altered to emphasize the agency of the protagonist: ‘What shall I do?’ ‘Where shall I turn?’”⁶⁸

With this, Holloway gives a clearer definition of what *dubitatio* actually is. This is better than Croy's definition because he just references rhetorical handbooks from the Roman empire.

Holloway, on the other hand, gives evidence going back as far as Homer to explain how the rhetorical trope functions. Also, Holloway gives a reason why Paul would use this trope, which is to find a way to console the Philippian church.⁶⁹

When it comes to my contribution to this study, I agree with Droge that Paul is expressing language that expresses a Socratic desire to kill himself. From the nature of the structure of the passage, Paul is expressing that he has a choice to either leave or to stay in the

⁶⁸ Holloway, *Philippians*, 96-97.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

flesh. Paul then makes a choice and then explains why he will preform that task stating that necessity is the reason for that. Also, from the structure of the language as well, there is good reason to argue that Paul is using a *dubitatio* for his rhetoric of choice, but not “feigning” being suicidal.

Another contribution to this study is analyzing the errors in Croy’s argument against Droge. If we remember, Croy’s main argument was based off one Latin rhetorical trope called *dubitatio*. Holloway disputes that in his article and commentary which states that the word just means “perplexity.” Also, there are other holes in Croy’s argument as well which involves translations of Droge’s statements without the proper evidence. Also, whenever Croy uses a source, it can still be uses to support Droge’s argument, which shows that the source does not directly support Croy’s argument. All of these things are major factors when discussing the most relevant objection to Droge’s theory.

With all of this in mind, we see how scholarship has changed over the years regarding the pericope. In Augustine, even though he does not reference the verse, he has a strong stance against one killing themselves. The first modern scholar to point to this argument, Arthur J. Droge, has two works about this where he supports his claim that Paul is expressing a want to kill himself. Croy, on the other hand, doesn’t agree with Droge and claims that Paul is using *dubitatio*, which negates Paul from having the desire to kill himself. As this was shown, there are some holes in Croy’s argument where it calls into question the reliability of his claims. Some of these questions are his errors in translation and explanation of his rhetorical trope. Holloway, on the other hand, seems to be bringing the two together by stating explaining that Paul is using *dubitatio* but the language does claim that Paul wishes to kill himself.

Conclusion

When analyzing the full cultural context of the passage, we can see that it is clear that there is a strong possibility that the Apostle Paul is expressing language which we moderns would consider as “suicidal.” The first evidence comes from the verse itself where Paul is claiming that he is “hard-pressed” to choose between staying in the flesh or departing with Christ. In it as well, Paul states why he desires to depart with Christ, which is because it is “more necessary” [ἀναγκαιότερον] for the sake of the Philippians. So, Paul is basically being self-sacrificing because he is choosing to stay in the flesh, other than what he “desires” [ἐπιθυμίαν] which was to depart and be with Christ. So, from the fact that he states that he has the desire and choice, it gives the likelihood that he is expressing Socratic language.

This possibility is enhanced by analyzing the cultural world in which Paul lived. In the Roman literary context, one killing oneself was considered a noble death in some cases. We see this with Lucretia and how she killed herself and Plutarch’s narrative of Cato and his death. The literary context went farther back to Plato and his narrative on Socrates’ last night in the *Phaedo*. In the text, the Platonic Socrates states that there needs to be a divine “necessity” [ἀνάγκη] in order for one to kill themselves.

We also read that the Jewish world did not view self-killing as a moral issue. This is seen with examples from the Septuagint and Maccabean texts. More importantly, we see examples of Platonic thinking in Josephus’ writings that are seen in Paul as well. The Platonic language is ἀνάγκη which Josephus writes about when he discusses individuals killing themselves. This is seen in “Eleazar’s” speech at Masada and Josephus’s description of the mass suicide in the cave.

In terms of scholarship, there are three main scholars who have written about this subject: Arthur J. Droge, N. Clayton Croy, and Paul Holloway. Droge was the one who brought this topic into the light, Croy was the one who rejected it, and Holloway was the one who took a spin on

the whole idea which Croy brings forward. My contribution to this lineage of scholarship is to point out the flaws in Croy's argumentation. The flaws that I pointed out were his translation errors, and overall tactics he used to go against Droge.

So, was the Apostle Paul suicidal? It depends how you look at the evidence. If you see it as he lived in a time that celebrated that behavior, and him using that specific language, then yes, he was expressing suicidal language. If you agree with Croy, then Paul is using a rhetorical trope which implies that he is play-acting being suicidal. I, on the other hand, think that Paul is expressing suicidal language because his culture did not see it an immoral issue. This also goes with linguistic factors as well, with ἀνάγκη being a link to Socrates. This link is then further supported by Josephus, another Roman Jew, who uses this term in speeches involving people who participated in a mass suicide. The final point is that the main objection to this theory, Croy's article, has many flaws which does not negate the language that is explicitly stated. So, yes, the language is "suicidal."

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